

# Braving the Flames: The Stories of Two Women Wildland Firefighters

By: DCNR

Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) Bureau of Forestry is responsible for protecting the Commonwealth's 17 million acres of public and private wildlands from damage by wildfire.

Since 1973, Pennsylvania wildland firefighters have assisted with wildfire suppression efforts and other natural disasters throughout the nation. The firefighters who tackle these blazes are resilient, skilled, and unwavering in their commitment, and they demonstrate that courage knows no gender. Here are two stories of remarkable women who make a significant impact in the fight against wildfires.

In the battle against wildfires that ravage homes, businesses, and natural habitats, wildland firefighters make extraordinary commitments. These brave individuals often travel to remote areas across the United States to support communities and families on some of the worst days of their lives. Among them is Cecile Stelter, a wildland firefighter with the DCNR Bureau of Forestry, who has been dedicated to fighting fires since 2000.

Cecile's journey into wildland firefighting began unexpectedly. Although she had been employed with DCNR's Bureau of Forestry, she initially didn't see herself in this line of work. Her early career as a forest technician led to a promotion as a forester, where she first experienced the training required for wildfire response. It was during a training session that a colleague encouraged her to consider becoming certified as a wildland firefighter.

Cecile's journey included rigorous training that tested her physical and mental limits. "Carrying 45 pounds for three miles in 45 minutes was daunting, especially because I weighed 110 pounds," she says, referring to the Work Capacity Test known as the "pack test." After she passed all of the training requirements and certifications, Cecile quickly became involved in various firefighting roles, ultimately becoming a public information officer. "To be a small part of a larger team that comes together from all over the country during a crisis is incredible," she reflects. "People don't realize that individuals from Pennsylvania can mobilize resources on a national level to help fight fires."

Balancing her responsibilities as a district manager and firefighter can be complex. With deployments often requiring 16 days of travel, Cecile must juggle commitments at home and at work. Yet, the rewards of her work outweigh the difficulties. "Helping families who have lost their homes and seeing the impact we can make is profoundly moving," she adds. "We can bring a little calm during their most distressing times, which is gratifying."

Cecile believes that a successful wildland firefighter must have a true sense of service, especially considering the emotional toll of the job. "You're spending long days away from home, sometimes in remote locations without cell service, and you're often interacting with people in crisis," she says. "If you don't have a sense of purpose, it would be very difficult to do this."

As the field evolves, Cecile sees a growing opportunity for women and others interested in firefighting. "Compared to when I started 20 years ago, we are sending out more people than ever before in various roles beyond just firefighters, including finance, operations, and logistics," she explains. "There are paths for everyone, with more opportunities for advancement, and we encourage people to get involved locally. Even if you don't want to go out of state, there are plenty of opportunities here in Pennsylvania to fight wildfires and be part of Incident Management Teams."

Starting as a summer intern at DCNR in 1998, Jodi Skipper has moved through the ranks to become an assistant district forester, managing both maintenance and fire teams. Her story is not just one of personal achievement; it reflects the evolving landscape of wildland firefighting and the increasing presence of women in this crucial role.

Inspired by her upbringing on a farm, where hard work was a way of life, she first became involved with firefighting while pursuing her forestry degree at Penn State Mont Alto. Her introduction to the field came through a professor who recognized her potential, leading her to a state fire camp where she was one of the few women present. She found support in her male colleagues, who often treated her like one of their own. "It's a common misconception that there is a difference between the abilities of men and women in these situations," she explains. "You have to pull together and rely on each other. You end up with 19 brothers on your crew."

Wildland firefighting is a tough and unpredictable job; but many firefighters feel called to face these conditions to help others. "During my first trip to Montana in 2000, we went on a school bus to the field. There was a little boy holding a Tonka toy box he had turned into a sign that read 'Thank you firefighters!' and that got my heart. People needed us to be there. We made a difference."

When Jodi began her career as a wildland firefighter, she would oftentimes be the only woman on her crew. Eventually, she worked her way up to the role of crew boss and as a leader she dedicated herself to providing the best experience and training possible to the crew members.

Each assignment takes place in a different setting and overnight accommodations could range from camping in a field to sleeping in a hotel, and your mode of transportation might include canoeing to work on an island in Minnesota. The variable nature of the job is both challenging and exhilarating, as no two days are ever the same. Jodi has been deployed to more than 16 states and each trip has presented new obstacles and demands.

Over the years, the landscape of wildland firefighting has changed significantly. There are now more women in the field than there were in 2000. The U.S. Forest Service reports that approximately 13 percent of their wildland firefighters are women. At DCNR, the number of women wildland fighters is significantly lower. There is a concerted effort for these statistics to change, and states like Pennsylvania are actively encouraging women to join.

For those women who may be hesitant to pursue a career in firefighting, the message is clear: there's a community of experienced women, like Jodi and Cecile, who are eager to offer support. "If there are any women out there that are interested but have questions or hesitations, please reach out. I would love to answer them," Jodi urges. "I've been in many situations that you might encounter, and I'm here to help."

The journey of wildland firefighting is one of growth, resilience, and empowerment. As more women step into this field, they not only break barriers but also pave the way for future generations. Whether it's a sense of duty or the fulfillment of working toward a shared mission, wildland firefighting continues to be a call to adventure for those willing to embrace it.



**Cecile M. Stelter, District Forester, Cornplanter Forest District**  
A firefighter poses for a photo while holding a rock



**Jodi Skipper, Assistant District Forester, Rothrock State Forest**  
A firefighter stands in front of a distant wildfire.